



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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WEATHER OFFERED UNIQUE PROBLEMS IN 1956 WATERFOWL MIGRATIONS

Heavier-than-usual concentrations of ducks and geese along the principal rivers in the Upper Mississippi Valley, blizzard conditions which not only stopped the northward flight but in some instances forced the ducks to head southward, and the general lateness in the spring break-up are noteworthy characteristics of the 1956 northern waterfowl migration, field men for the Fish and Wildlife Service report.

All of which means that waterfowl hatching will be delayed from two to four weeks and that the completion of the first of the annual breeding ground surveys will be somewhat later than in 1955 and may approximate the schedule of 1954.

The unusual concentrations on the main streams were due to two things--the dry weather in Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota and parts of Minnesota, which forced the birds to the rivers, and the continued ice conditions northward which held them there. In contrast to the dryness of the southern portion of the prairie States, North Dakota, northwestern Minnesota and the Canadian provinces report plenty of water.

The migration on the Mississippi Flyway got under way early in March and by March 9 the peak of the migration had passed the southern boundary of Missouri. By mid-March large flocks were gathering along the Platte River in southern Nebraska, on the Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge in northwestern Missouri and even up to Ft. Madison in southern Iowa.

Bad weather bottled up the birds along the Missouri River on the South Dakota-Nebraska line and on the Mississippi in northwestern Illinois but by the end of the month the birds were on the wing again, some of them getting as far north as Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge in northern South Dakota.

Then the blizzards hit, driving the birds back again to the Missouri River as far south as Sioux City, Iowa.

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Early in April, the waterfowl started north again and for a second time the blue and snow geese poured into Sand Lake Refuge and the peak of the migration for most species of ducks had moved from Nebraska and Iowa, only to be temporarily halted in South Dakota and southern Minnesota and southern Wisconsin.

With the moderate weather of mid-April the flooded Red River Valley and ice-free Saginaw Bay as well as numerous other open waters in North Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin beckoned and the birds were definitely on the move again.

All during the latter part of April the northbound birds moved into big concentrations in northern Minnesota and North Dakota and in the southern end of the Canadian provinces. Then winter hit again and on April 26, zero temperatures were reported in Saskatchewan and other prairie provinces.

What appears to be the first productive nesting in Saskatchewan began about May 1 but it was May 8 before the ice permitted the waterfowl to move into the Delta marsh in southern Manitoba.

Farm operations have been held back somewhat but there is little hope held out for any exceptional brood production in the stubblefields, where in some years the mallards and the pintails nest, hatch and move out before the spring plowing starts. Waterfowl will usually nest a second time if the first nest is broken up but the chances of successful late nesting during a season which is already some weeks behind schedule are not too bright.

Because of the lateness of the nesting the conditions on the breeding grounds in the next few months are highly important to successful production. As things are now, indications are that there will be a good duck hatch in the eastern parklands of Saskatchewan while the picture in the grasslands is quite spotty. In the Redvers area in southeast Saskatchewan the breeding populations seem to be larger than in 1955 but somewhat smaller than in 1952 and 1953; there will be some losses by predation due to the late season. From Manitoba comes the report that nesting is under way and that unless some further unusual weather conditions develop there should be a good hatch, two or three weeks later than normal.

The waterfowl breeding ground surveys include a breeding ground count to determine the relative number of mating birds, and a later inspection to ascertain production success. At the time of the latter survey approximately 30,000 young waterfowl are banded. The Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, fish and game departments of about 30 States, the Canadian provinces and personnel from private conservation agencies cooperate in these surveys. Normally the breeding population survey starts May 1, but it was delayed this year. The area inspected includes the known waterfowl breeding grounds in Alaska, Canada and the United States, with special emphasis on the prairies of northern United States and southern Canada where two-thirds of the ducks of North America are bred. The survey to estimate hatching success usually begins in late June.

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